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Xenophobia and Migrant-phobias in Russia: origins and challenges

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While xenophobic sentiments are always present in a society¹, they have become widespread in the 2000s. In 2002-2012, the share of respondents who do not feel hostility towards representatives of other nationalities decreased by over a quarter. The slogan "Russia for the Russians", which is supported not only by the Russians, but also by the representatives of the traditional minorities within Russia, has been increasingly popular in the 2000s. In November 2012, only 23% of the respondents reacted negatively to it, considering it properly fascist - as opposed to 30% in 1998 (Levada Centre in 2012a, p.176, 179).

Whom is xenophobia directed against? How are migrant-phobias related to xenophobia? What are the hidden underlying factors behind the rise of xenophobia and the aggression towards the "others"? Is there a connection between the prevalence of xenophobia and the functioning of social institutions and social setting?

Xenophobia: the objects and the discourse

Xenophobia in Russia has several dimensions, of which the most important are: ethnic (ethno-phobia), migration (migrant-phobia), religious (Islam-phobia, first and foremost), and according to citizenship (presence / absence of the Russian citizenship)². The exaggerated importance of ethnicity permeates many aspects of public debate regarding socio-economic and political life, and the discussion of social problems is often unjustly transposed into the ethnic dimension.

The factor of being "an alien" and "an outsider" is, apparently, no less important than the factor of ethnicity: ethnic minorities that are traditional for a particular locality are most often perceived as "inner minorities", "insiders", "our own". Being an alien, intersected with being an ethnic minority, aggravates anti-immigrant sentiments. As the host population is faced mainly with migrants of other ethnicity, migrant-phobias have a clear ethnic aetiology.

The situation is further complicated when ethnic migrants belong to a religious group whose religion is not shared by the majority, and who do not have Russian citizenship. Central Asian migrants, persons from Azerbaijan, thus belong to the most vulnerable groups of migrants in the majority of Russian regions.

This is partly true: the Russians are relatively tolerant mainly towards newcomers from Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, that is, those groups that do not visually stand out in the host community. Irritation, hostility, and distrust are dominant attitudes towards the other ethnic groups amongst the respondents.

The attitude towards the above listed ethnic groups remained unchanged for many years, or changed slightly (Mukomel, 2005, pp. 69, 77; Mukomel, 2011, p.37). The internal migrants from the North Caucasus constitute an exception: the growth of xenophobia towards them is beyond any doubt. After the events at the Manezhnaya Square, the support of the slogan "Stop feeding the Caucasus" does not fall below 57%, and in November 2012, the slogan received the support of 65% of the respondents (Levada Centre 2012 a, p.179).

The growth of xenophobia in the 1990s can be explained, firstly, by a traumatic shock caused by the fundamental socio-political and economic transformation of the Russian society, and, secondly, by the elimination of the law-enforcement agencies.

As a result of adaptation of the Russians to the new realities, the phobias of losing resources, typical of the 1990s, have nearly disappeared - at least from the public debate (except for the fear of competition on the labour market and wages dumping), equally common back in the days as phobias

¹ The recognition of presence of xenophobia in the society does not imply an unquestionably negative evaluation of the state of society. The problem is the degree of xenophobic sentiments, and the extent to which they threaten social stability.

² At present, in addition to traditional phobias, a tendency to an increased homophobia can be noted.

of identity loss (Levada 2000, p.433). Phobias of identity loss have intensified; however, the focus of the discourse has changed: the mass-media and the public politicians prefer to appeal to the “cultural matrix”, “cultural code”, “cultural ties”, etc. In the meantime, culture is understood as ethnically immanent, although “the idea of the innate culture, national character, and the like has either been completely discredited, or filed with modern sociology” (Sztompka, 2012, p.243). “Cultural racism”, which replaces the hierarchy of racial biological racism with the idea of the incompatibility of “cultures” and the danger of mixing them, is now more common than the “classical” racism (Osipov, 2010, p.15).

B. Parekh captures a flaw in this discourse when it is applied to migrants: one should not think that a society that has been homogeneous before immigration will become homogenous after the immigration stops. Since the immigrants belong to different religious, ethnic or other groups, it is difficult to ignore the differences in their expectations, cultural resources and ways of interaction with the society. Diversity that emerged as a result of immigration is not necessarily deeper and more intense than the diversity that exists in the host societies, with their immanently different views on homosexuality, gay marriage, cohabitation, relationships between parents and children, family discipline, the capitalist economy, respect for law. Immigrants are more conservative in their approaches to nearly all these issues than the majority of the host community members; moral and cultural barriers between them and the society are thinner than between the members of the host society (Parekh 2008, p.81).

While the increased scale of migration and its structural transformation have both played some role in the growth of xenophobia and the reorientation of radical nationalists to fight the influx of ethnically different migrants (Byzov, 2012, p.162), a certain political anti-migration philosophy, based on racial-ethnic arguments and images, has been formed already at the end of the last century (Zinchenko, Loginov 2011, p.570).

The growth of xenophobia in its various manifestations in the 2000s may have been due not only to external factors, but also to deep, fundamental factors of transformation and the functioning of the Russian society.

Xenophobia and the Russian society in the context of a culture of trust

A quest for the transformation of social and political institutions has not been formed today. First of all, the Russians are not satisfied with the growing social inequality, particularly, income inequality: from 0,387 in 1995, the Gini coefficient rose to 0,397 in 2001, and reached 0,420 in 2012 (Rosstat 2013).

Selective justice, social inequalities in education, health care, lack of social mobility for young people, a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the authorities, etc. aggravate the feeling of dissatisfaction with everyday life. Russia is placed in the second hundred of countries according to the subjective assessment of life satisfaction of its citizens (experienced well-being) (HPI 2012, p.25).

Social inequality breeds discontent: “with the illegitimacy of such [social – V.M.] inequalities in public consciousness, they have a major destabilizing impact on the Russian society and the growth of social contradictions within” (Gorshkov 2010, p.3).

It was noted back in the 1990's: “within the Russian society, the level of mutual trust is low; typical are: mutual indifference, lack of reciprocal (i.e., based on the mutual responsible) behaviour and its limitations to the circle of family and friends; the sense of duty is limited to the family circle” (Diligensky 1998, p. 230). Low levels of interpersonal trust and confidence in social institutions was recorded in the 2000s by sociological centres and specialists [FOM 2008a, FOM 2008b; Sasaki, Latov,

etc. 2010; Golenkova, Ighithanyan 2012, p.198-199]. Particularly alarming is the fact that throughout the years 2004-2012 the faith into people weakened.³

Interpersonal distrust affects, first of all, direct interpersonal contacts with specific representatives of minorities (ethnic, migrant, religious, etc.).

Another, broader confidence circle encompasses a wide range of categories of people, united into imagined communities: ethnic groups, religions, races, etc. In this case, trust towards specific persons is transferred into trust towards more abstract public objects. This form of trust is often based on stereotypes and prejudices. As the impulse of trust applies only towards persons, “in order to discontinue it, it is enough to dehumanize, objectify the recipient of trust, deprive him of his human traits: personality, self / approval, dignity, autonomy” (Sztompka 2012, p.117, 157-158). Distrust based on depersonalization provokes xenophobia towards all members of the imagined community.

Institutional trust constitutes a separate problem. In Russia, 44% of citizens state that they trust political institutions. This percentage is significantly lower than the OECD average, which is 56% (OECD 2013).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the level of confidence towards state institutions (parliament, regional and local authorities, political parties, police, courts) is consistently low (Levada Centre 2012 b). The level of confidence has been steadily declining since 2008 (Golenkova, Ighithanyan 2012, p.276-277).

The society is experiencing an erosion of culture of trust, accompanied by the expansion of cultural of distrust, which is characterized by anomie, instability of public order, the opacity of the institutions, estrangement of the surrounding communities, irresponsibility of other people and institutions (Sztompka 2012, p. 300 - 305, 414). The social and political structure of modern-day Russia plays a role in this erosion of culture of trust. The alignment of the vertical of power and its centralization reduces the need of the authorities in trust of the citizens: “in case of complete control over a certain phenomena, trust naturally does not matter” (Sztompka 2012, p. 71, p. 379).

The development of the culture of mistrust is associated with a low level of loyalty and solidarity: the growth of dissatisfaction with the current situation in the country in all social groups (Levada Centre 2012a, p.22), along with the violation of basic principles of justice, a sense of “wrongness” of what is happening, “leads to an increase in atomization that destroys the experienced sense of organic community of the nation and, as a result, the foundations of social solidarity of the Russians” (Tikhonov 2013, p.289). This undermines the fundamental values of the Russians.

Russian culture (according to G. Hofstede) is a collectivist culture with a high level of uncertainty avoidance (which is reflected in a high level of anxiety and a tendency to “release energy” and aggressive behaviour), with a high level of distance vis-à-vis the authority. According to R. Inglehart, “traditional values” prevail within (high importance of family, respect for the authorities and religion, combined with social conformism, openness towards nationalist views) and the value of “survival”, which is characterized by high importance of safety, a sense of threat from the aliens, members of other ethnic groups, persons of different cultures. Values of belonging to a community and “hierarchy” are explicitly present in the Russian culture (Lebedeva 2011).

Half of Russian respondents are oriented towards obedience; their focus on the independent social action is weak. They are characterized by assigning high importance to the hierarchical relationships in the society, obtaining and executing signals “from above” and the authorities, particularly toward those of lower standing within the status hierarchy. Distrust towards the others is accompanied by an increased trust to the government figures. The alternative values of the initiative autonomy prevail only amongst 3% of the Russian respondents. 46% of the respondents embrace intermediate values (Magoon, Rudnev 2013).

Dissatisfaction with the principles of distribution and social injustice amongst the Russians undermines the confidence and trust in fundamental values, and are fraught with doubts about the legitimacy of the existing order. The authorities are conscious of the danger of the erosion of

³ During these years, the Levada Center annually asked a question: «How has your faith into people changed over the year?». The number of persons who replied that it has weakened was 2.5 times greater than the number of persons who replied that it has grown stronger (Calculated by: Levada Center 2012 a, p.8).

traditional values and the destabilization of the foundations of the culture, in the first place – respect for the authorities, loyalty, and recognition of the legitimacy of the established order.

The solution is sought, firstly, in the use of traditional values of “order”⁴ and the appeal to “stability”. Secondly, it is sought through the termination of various forms of uncontrolled initiative and solidarity coming from below. Thirdly, it is sought through reformatting of solidarities. However, in all variants of this construction of “new solidarity”, the potential targets of xenophobia (ethnic, migrant and religious minorities, foreigners) are a priori “strangers.”

Ethnic solidarity occupies an unsuitably significant place in the range of other group solidarities. Although ethnic solidarity may directly correlate with the civil one (Drobizheva, Ryzhova 2010), sociologists have noted that solidarization is to a large extent based on a feeling of hurt, especially amongst the Russians (Drobizheva 2013, p.244).

In the 2000s, 15-18% of the respondents noted the growth of aggressiveness and anger (Levada-Zentr 2012a, p.16). The Russian society is still a mobilization type of society, and a climate of constant “struggle” is prerequisite for the mobilization conditions (Levada, 2001, p.13). In the early 2000s, it was suggested that the only mobilizing resource is the exploitation of the wounded national pride of the Russian people (Pain 2004, p.234). The mastering of the technology of “new solidarities”, accompanied by a constant search for and discovery of new objects of xenophobia, the “new outsiders”⁵, significantly expanded the resources of mobilization.

The transfer of differences in the interests of social groups into the political arena, and some groups opposing other groups, is not harmless. A search for ruptures, on the one hand, solves tactical problems thereby hampering the formation of opposition coalitions; on the other hand, it leads to a segmentation of the society, rather than its consolidation.

Xenophobia and migrant-phobias expand not only due to the expansion of the mobilization base, but also due to the activation of ethnic entrepreneurs. According to V.A. Tishkov, the discourse of “racism” includes not only everyday racism, but also political racism based on party ideology and reflected both in the party programs⁶ and in the practical activity, institutional racism, which is immanent to such social institutions as the army, school, health care, social assistance, religious organizations, and state racism, which is reflected in the legislation and practices (Zinchenko, Loginova 2011, p.571).

Changes within public consciousness and institutional framework are a difficult enduring process. In the meantime, the country faces serious challenges. A subtle and transparent policy of combating intolerance is necessary. Such policy must include an adoption of a state program and the establishment of public control over the functioning of social and political institutions to counteract xenophobia. Only in case of adoption of such policy an effective barrier to the escalation of xenophobia can be created.

Of particular importance are the tools to reconcile the interests of different social and political groups. If xenophobic sentiments are present in the society, they should be detected. A dialogue is necessary, as well as “the search for meanings” (Sztompka, 2012, p.327). Furthermore, institutional reforms are necessary. Otherwise, xenophobia will remain not only a product, but also an instrument of the Russian society’s functioning.

⁴ While ignoring other values, particularly, «justice». In the conditions of the growing social inequality, a quest for «justice» leads to frustration and increasingly aggressive attitudes.

⁵ In the meantime, the titles of the created pro-government movements are based on militaristic vocabulary (“Front”, “Defense” (“Oborona”)), on a single-meaning (“Ours” (“Nashi”), “Locals” (“Mestnye”)), or associative identification (“Steel” (“Stal”), “Marching Together” (“Iduschie vmeste”)).

⁶ The programs of all parliamentary parties, with the exception of the “United Russia”, contain xenophobic views (Mukomel 2012).

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